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WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

BILL LOVE

Paul was more than a little upset with the Galatians. They were preaching and believing "other gospels." He pronounced "anathema" on anyone preaching any other gospel than the one he had preached. He said it twice for emphasis. Anathema was a strong word, it meant forever cut off from God and his people. That makes us sit up straight when we think about it. What is the gospel to which we are converting people? As it was in the first century, so it is now: there are many bogus gospels and only one true gospel. The New Age people share the good news that we, ourselves, are divine. Some TV evangelists are selling "name it, claim it" religion. Others are saying the church itself is the good news: "Come see what we're doing! You won't believe how exciting it is here in our church! We have an answer for your every need!" The creed of our national religion of greed is seen in the bumper sticker: "I Want It All."

Growing up on the campus at Abilene Christian I heard a lot of discussion among the "preacher boys" about the famous debates in Restoration his-

tory. One topic of interest was the Roman Catholic claim that Peter was the first pope, the rock upon which Jesus established his church. We refuted that error by a careful study of the Greek words in Matthew 16:18: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,..." A second argument was the fact that the early church never preached Peter. If Peter, himself, was the rock foundation of the church then one might logically expect that truth to be proclaimed by the earliest evangelists and teachers. But Acts is silent on the subject. That was an impressive argument to me. It still is.

We should do what we urged our Roman Catholic friends to do. To discover the ancient gospel we should go to Acts with the questions: "What did they actually preach?" "When men and women confessed faith and were baptized, to what message were they responding?"

First, we notice what the apostles and evangelists did **not** preach. Peter, James and John had a mountaintop experience with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. All the disciples had been with him in the boat when he calmed the sea. And when he raised Lazarus. But they never preached their own exciting experiences with Jesus as the gospel. All twelve were Jews with a rich heritage as God's people. They longed to see the glory of David's kingdom once again. But

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they did not preach a program of restoration. Because he had been a tax collector for the Romans Matthew knew the contempt of his fellow Israelites. Jesus' call must have given him a new sense of dignity. But, so far as the record shows, he did not preach a gospel of self-worth. The twelve were different in background and temperament. Jesus called them together, taught them to pray, to love one another, and gave them a mission. But they never preached their fellowship or

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the church as such. Let's remember what our main question is. We are not questioning whether mountainpeak experiences with Jesus are meaningful and confirming, whether the treasure of a rich heritage is to be prized, whether self-worth is an implication of the gospel, whether the church is a great gift of God's love. All of that is assumed. The question is: if they didn't preach any of these things as their central message what **did** they preach? A review of the story will tell.

The Gospel Preached In Acts

As Jesus had instructed, they waited and prayed until God sent his Spirit on Pentecost. When God's life-giving power descended Peter and the others began telling the story of salvation. Travelers from far and wide heard it in their various tongues. Someone tried to brush it off. "It's no big deal; they've been into the Manichevitz already."

Peter explained they were not full of wine, not full of themselves, but full of the Holy Spirit. It was all foretold by the prophet Joel. The scope of what was happening was long ago indicated when the prophet said that "whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Peter entered his main message by explaining how and why Jesus died. The cross was not just a tragic miscarriage of justice. Jesus was not an idealistic reformer caught in the wheels of the establishment machine. Nor was he a martyr who offered himself in the hope that someone might see his cause and pick up the flag. In one short statement Luke reports how Peter identified the three parties responsible for the cross.

...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

Peter boldly proclaimed that the cross was God's idea. The central truth of the atonement is full of mystery: God had planned it from the beginning. Notice that Peter also said that Jews and Gentiles were the other parties to the crucifixion. All mankind was represented at Golgotha. The irony is strong: Jesus saved all when all put him on the cross. Peter went on to say that God had raised Jesus up. It was not possible that death should hold Jesus. God was in control. Despite Jesus' own fears and dread, despite appearances at the cross, God's victory was never in doubt. Just as Jesus had repeatedly said "I **must** go to Jerusalem," God's victory over Satan and death was a "must" for his plan. The resurrection was the Father's "yes" to Jesus' work, his stamp of approval on the way his son opened the door for all his other children to come home. Peter concluded with the keynote of the day, the theme of the whole mission to the Jews, contrasting human and divine treatment of Jesus: "**God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.**"

Three thousand Jews from all over the world repented, were baptized into Jesus' name and received the Holy Spirit! The church was born. The community of faith continued in the apostles' teaching of the crucified, in fellowship and in observing the Lord's Supper together every chance they had. Proclamation, baptism and the Lord's supper were the God-given means of access to the gift of Golgotha. In fact, without the cross and resurrection there would have been no message, no ordinances, no church. The church did not create the gospel, the gospel created the church.

What happened in the next few weeks and months was truly amazing! In the very city where Jesus was crucified only weeks before, his people witnessed, worshipped, shared, and grew in numbers and commitment to their Lord. The fledgling church withstood vicious attacks from without. Peter and John went up to the temple to pray, healed a lame man, and preached the gospel. It was God's plan, they said, since the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would deliver up his servant Jesus for the sins of all. "The one you killed God raised up. You had no idea what you were doing. But God raised the Prince of Life in victory over the grave as the prophets had said." There it was again, the core gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was called the "servant" of God. Who would not remember Isaiah's words: "he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,..."?

The next day Peter and John were called on the carpet to face the same council that put Jesus to death. They boldly told the same story. "Whom you crucified, God raised up!" The authorities were amazed at these country boys standing there in their overalls and flannel shirts. Peter and John reminded them of Jesus in their boldness. Their confidence was not in themselves. In fact, they were plenty shaky in their own strength. The whole church went into prayer, quoting the psalms about rulers arrayed against God and his anointed. They recalled Isaiah's suffering servant who bore the sins of many. Interpreting the cross by the Old Testament they found meaning in their suffering.

The leaders once again went to the temple to preach Jesus. Great crowds came to hear and many were baptized. The authorities threw the apostles in jail, an angel got them out, told them to go preach again in the temple. They continued with the same theme: "The one whom you crucified by hanging him on a tree God raised up." The new twist about the "tree" reminded every faithful Jew of that passage in Deuteronomy which said anyone who suffered capital punishment by hanging was cursed of God. The cross was a scandal. They said it right out loud. But God raised Jesus up.

The authorities were not sure what to do; this new movement was growing in popularity every day. One of the church's table servants named Stephen went down to the synagogue, performed miracles and preached Christ. He was accused of blasphemy against Moses and was brought to trial. Before the whole town he told the Old Testament story of God's unfolding plan to redeem all peoples, emphasizing the stubborn and proud opposition of God's people along the way which had reached new heights in Israel's current idolatry of the temple. Stephen must have failed his Dale Carnegie course in public speaking if his conclusion is any sample:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.

They stoned him to death for preaching Christ crucified. Young Saul of Tarsus heard the blasphemies as he held the garments of those "doing God's will." The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus were not only that core gospel which the church, it was also the main defense of those early heroes of the faith as they stood up to fierce opposition.

Following Stephen's death savage persecution

broke upon the church and they went everywhere telling the story. Through pain and suffering the faith burst the bonds of narrow Jewish nationalism and broke through the wall of racial prejudice. Jesus died and was raised to be the universal Lord of all. The Spirit called another of those table servants, Philip, to a lonely road running from Jerusalem down to Gaza. The Spirit nudged him to join a lonely figure riding along in his chariot reading Isaiah 53. The Ethiopian eunuch was a convert to Judaism (as much as any eunuch could be) who had made a pilgrimage to the holy city, and was on his way home. According to Old Testament regulations a eunuch was never really allowed in the congregation of God's people. But he loved Israel's God and was as much a part of the activities as the law allowed. It was no trick at all for Philip to move from Isaiah's picture of the suffering servant to the story of Jesus. The eunuch was baptized into Jesus and for the first time was fully accepted as a member of God's people.

Peter really had no idea of the far-reaching implications of his noble words on Pentecost. He was at Joppa, napping on a house top patio when he had a vision of a sheet let down with all kinds of animals, "clean" and "unclean." "Rise, Peter, kill and eat," the Lord said. Peter would take some convincing. Three times it happened. "No, Lord..." (An interesting combi-

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nation of words.) "No, Lord, you see I am kosher and have never eaten anything unclean in all my life."

But Peter wasn't in charge, God was. Before he knew it he was in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion with a whole houseful of Gentiles waiting to hear what he had to say. He really didn't want to be there and made that clear. At Pentecost he had proclaimed that the gospel was for all, now he was seeing it worked out in life. He told the story of Jesus, concluding with the same core gospel we have heard from the first:

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to

us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead...To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

The Spirit fell on the Gentiles as it had on the Jews on Pentecost and they were baptized into the name of Jesus. Peter had preached the same gospel of Christ crucified and raised. Despite Peter's hang ups, God was working his plan. The death, burial, and resurrection formed the heart of the message.

Meanwhile, God had tapped young Saul of Tarsus for his special mission to the Gentiles. On the Damascus road Jesus appeared to Saul. The carpenter, lay preacher from Nazareth, crucified for blasphemy was, after all, God's messiah! This appearance of the risen and enthroned Lord exploded in Saul's heart, blasting his most cherished career plans. After his repentance and baptism he was led into Arabia. For three years he sorted through all he had believed, adjusting everything to the new realization that God had come in the plain man from the hill country, crucified and risen.

God called Saul, now Paul, to go with Barnabas on a preaching mission. As different as Paul and Peter were their messages at the center were precisely the same. At Antioch of Pisidia Paul preached in the synagogue. He told his brethren that the God of their fathers had worked his plan all the way down through John the Baptist to Jesus who fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies. But Jesus was hated, "hanged on a tree," and God raised him from the dead. The Gentiles standing at the back of the room loved the message. The Jews hated it and ran Paul and Barnabas out of town. The drama was repeated again and again wherever Paul went. His message was always the same: Jesus of Nazareth, God's messiah, crucified and raised to bring salvation to all peoples.

It wasn't just the unconverted Jews who had trouble with this new, expansive mission. Many Jewish Christians objected. The church did not really have the matter settled until the Jerusalem conference met and confirmed that God was, indeed, acting among the Gentiles. Not that the conference made the slightest difference in the synagogues where Paul went to preach. In Thessalonica he preached, proving by the scriptures that it was becoming of the messiah to suffer, that God raised him from the dead. Some believed, both Jews and Gentiles. But opposition set off a mob scene and the missionaries had to leave town.

Over at Athens Paul preached the same message to a completely different crowd. Those assembled met regularly to hear the latest philosophical theories. Paul acknowledged their interest in ultimate things, told them of the Creator God who needed no man-made

houses, and went on to preach repentance in the one whom God had appointed and approved by raising him from the dead. The "what's happening now?" crowd laughed him out of court. A few believed.

Everywhere Paul went he established churches preaching the same gospel of Jesus crucified and raised. Along the way, in and out of scrapes, he wrote letters to the churches he had established. In those letters he applied the "word of the cross," exploring the implications of the core gospel to daily church problems.

Finally he ended up once more at Jerusalem. Like his Lord before him, he was shuffled from one magistrate to another. Paul made the core gospel clear even to the Roman Procurator, Festus. Briefing King Agrippa on Paul's trial up to that point Festus said the accusers "had certain points of dispute with him about their own superstition and about one Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive." Paul addressed the Jewish king, summarizing his case:

To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles.

Legal recourse in Palestine became less and less an option. So Paul appealed to Caesar. As a prisoner in Rome Paul invited the Jewish leaders to come hear him. He recounted the story of Israel that they all knew, laboring for hours "trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and the prophets." A few believed, most did not.

God's Spirit moved with enormous power through the core gospel of Christ crucified and raised. This gospel of a crucified and risen God scandalized both Jew and Gentile, and, paradoxically, was the salvation of both. The word was out, the gospel is for all. God wants all his children back home and he has opened the way. The veil of the temple at Jerusalem was forever split from top to bottom when both Jew and Gentile crucified Jesus and he said, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

Paul could have preached his rich heritage. He could have related his exciting conversion and ecstatic experiences. He might have proclaimed the glorious miracle of the church or his program of missions. He preached none of these gospels as his only gospel which has power to save. "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."